

# **A Short History of Feminism in Turkey and Feminist Resistance in Gezi**

**Cihan Tekay & Zeyno Ustun**

*-Text prepared for the presentation*

## **Part I**

### **History of the Woman Question and Feminism in Turkey**

#### ***Republican Period***

In the Turkish case of nation-building women have been instrumentalized to define modernity. The image of the new “modern” Turkish woman was directly controlled by the state policies of the Republican era, which facilitated the cultural revolution deemed “necessary” to build the new independent, modern, Westernized, and secular Turkish nation. The modernization project not only marked the modernization of institutions, but prescribed the modernization of the “social imaginary” and of everyday life through gender.

The reforms implemented for women in 1920s Turkey were born out of the politics of the single-party era, which viewed women's rights as a requirement for the formation of a democratic nation-state. Decision-making for the new Turkish nation in the new “democratic” environment of the new state was also heavily gendered by a legacy of patriarchy and male-domination, supplemented by exclusionary policies that were directed to women's movements. When women’s political parties sought to participate in the political realm in the Early Republican Period, it was argued that the republic had given women all their rights and there was no more need for women to organize.

Dress lay at the center of the understanding that all forms of life, even private life, should be similar to the social life of the West. These new forms were introduced as the essential symbols of modernity, and had to be followed if one was to access the public sphere and to benefit from the state's facilities. The veil or the headscarf was directly associated with “tradition”, and thus deemed “uncivilized”, considered to be getting in the way of Turkey's efforts to join the realm of the “civilized' nations.

The first ban on veiling was implemented through the Ministry of Education as early as 1924. The issue of women's veiling in institutions of higher education remained an issue throughout the 1980s, 90s and 2000s, as women in Turkey protested the denial of their access to universities since 1980s, in the aftermath of regulations set by Higher Education Committee (YÖK), and the debate on this issue has become a national concern which has been taken up repeatedly in the national assembly. The recent “democratic package” lifts the ban on the veil in public institutions, except for the police and military establishments.

Kemalist egalitarianism, while encouraging women's equal participation in the public sphere, also conceived of women primarily as mothers and wives. Therefore, women's access to education was framed in these terms. The expectations from women to fulfill their duties to the nation through motherhood and through the preservation of their unpaid labor in the household, while simultaneously entering the workforce, created a gap between women's perceived and lived realities.

The construction of the "new" women who are successful both in their career and in being good housewives and mothers conceals the emergence of a class of female servants to alleviate the burden of housework for the upper class professional women. This untold history of female labor created a dividing line between upper-class professional women who joined the workforce in the public sphere and the working class women who remained in the private sphere by providing domestic labor in upper-class households.

### *1980s-present*

If the roots of the woman question in modern Turkey can be found in the Republican era, the awakening of feminist consciousness can be traced to the 1980s. In the 1970s, feminism was defined in Turkey within the Marxist framework, as Marxism was the dominant paradigm of the left in Turkey, as embodied in the student and worker mobilizations of the decade. After the 1980 coup which marked the onset of neoliberalization in Turkey and instituted a major crackdown on the radical left, leftist women regrouped and started feminist discussion groups in private homes, as political repression continued during the first 5 years of the decade, limiting public political activity. "Personal is political" became a part of these women's lexicon, as they experimented with non-hierarchical meeting structures. The meetings were followed by street actions in the latter part of the decade, such as marches against domestic violence, and a successful campaign for the annulment of the infamous Article 438 in the Turkish Penal Code, which considered female rape victims "whores."

In the 1990s, the feminist circles grew from a minority of women who mostly came out of the 70s Marxist left to include Kemalist as well as Muslim women. Simultaneously, feminist and women's initiatives were institutionalized as NGOs, women's journals, collectives, and task forces within trade organizations. Attempts to bridge the distance between Turkish feminists in the West and Kurdish women's struggles in the east were initiated, especially under the banner of campaigns against domestic violence/violence against women. Simultaneously, a rapprochement between secular feminists and their Muslim counterparts started growing, as they collectively protested women's right to access education and public space, as veiled women were denied entry to universities through the provisions of Higher Council of Education.

The 2000s saw many gains for the feminist and women's movements, as many reforms were passed on the parliamentary level. The Civil Code was revised to end the patriarchal hegemony of the husband in the family on the legislative level, the Penal Code was ridden of many articles which

disproportionately disadvantaged women. Laws were passed to protect women from domestic violence, and constitutional reforms acknowledged the need for the state to institute affirmative action.

Another important development throughout the 1990s and 2000s was the rise of an autonomous women's movement within the Kurdish movement. Kurdish women started to play important roles within the Kurdish political parties and organizations, actively confronting and challenging the patriarchal structures of these political formations. They influenced the charters and regulations of the consecutive Kurdish parties, implementing gender quotas and gender-balanced co-chairpersonship structures, which ensured the consistently high participation of women in politics.

Beyond self-defined "feminist" or "women's" movements, Saturday Mothers and Peace Mothers became emblematic of the 90s and 2000s in Turkey. The military coup of 1980 and the Turkish state's brutal policies in Kurdistan resulted in massive political repression of young people who struggled within left and Kurdish movements. Mothers became politicized actors in the public sphere as their children were "disappeared" in these decades, unrecorded victims to military, police and paramilitary forces.

### *Before Gezi*

Although we cannot exhaust all the developments pertaining to women's struggle within the last decade, we want to touch on some major developments that occurred before the Gezi uprising took place. We have previously established that feminist struggle in Turkey predates the Gezi uprising. Now we will explore how the struggle has intensified during the conservative and neoliberal AKP rule. During this period, policies have been implemented, which directly seek control over the female body, reducing it to a site of biological and labor reproduction. With these policies, the female subject has been denied the space to exist with all her complexities but reduced to a monolithic passive entity of patriarchal political hegemony.

The major issues that occupied feminists in the last few years before Gezi were domestic violence and femicide, AKP's policies of population control through control of the female body and reproduction, and women's labor under a neoliberal regime. In the last few years was the onset of AKP's new population politics, constituting a set of heavy-handed interventions in policies, which seek to regulate fertility. A ban on abortion was introduced as draft legislation in 2012, which met with quite a bit of resistance from women, inciting street protests and online activism. However, the virtual ban on abortion is only one segment of AKP's policies towards increasing the population, as the government had already been giving out incentives to families with three children or more. The new "package", a set of bills which are aimed at encouraging working women to give birth by extending the flexibility of work for women during the first few years following pregnancy, has received much criticism from feminists for consolidating neoliberalism's effects on women's labor, while also implementing a nationalist agenda bent on increasing the population and reducing women

to their role in the family as mothers and wives. PM Erdoğan's discourse around abortion and C-sections especially aggravated large sections of women, as he compared abortion to the recent Uludere/Roboski massacre in which Kurdish civilians, most of them children, were killed by the Turkish military while smuggling commodities from the border, the only source of income for many families living in border towns where the effects of the 30-year long war are deeply felt.

The neoliberalization of Turkish economy brought about new ways to exploit all forms of women's labor, an area feminists have focused on in the last decades. Major headway was made during the 2000s, as an all-women strike in Antalya Free Trade Zone which was won at the end of a 16-month struggle influenced a wave of women's strikes all over the country, culminating in the Turkish Airlines labor dispute beginning with an indefinite action by workers in May 2012, followed by an all-out strike in May 2013, immediately before the onset of the Gezi uprising. Like many other majority-women strikes, the THY strike not only focused on wages but made demands specifically pertaining to women's bodies. A ban on red lipstick and hair buns for flight attendants, instituted in April of this year, was the cherry on top of a cake, as attendants had been filing complaints on the long hours affecting their bodies and resulting in chronic illnesses, most of which ironically affecting their reproductive system. The THY strike is important in the context of the new women's employment package, as it makes clear the government's vested interest is not in protecting women workers from the violations of capital, but in creating the conditions in which her body is primarily understood as the site of reproduction, and her labor is relegated to partial and flexible participation in the workforce.

In the light of the historical background I tried to sketch here, Zeyno will follow with an analysis of the governmental discourse on women's bodies and the counter-power response to it from the ground.

## **Part II**

### **A timeline of happenings on the Ground and Governmental Discourse**

As you can see in the timeline we prepared, we read the happenings in Gezi Resistance and the Govt. discourse in parallel, in order to understand the flow of both constructive and deconstructive maneuvers of feminist resistance and the government.

There is, however, one more dimension in accordance with the feminist struggle within the resistance. There were patriarchal elements used by the male-dominant groups of protestors as well, which later resulted in encounters between female and male groups of Gezi.

*"Let's see you use that pepper spray. Take off your helmets, drop your batons and let's see who's the real man"*

Considering these internal conflicts within the Gezi as well, I want to start with the two female images, which during the Gezi protests, became the symbols of the movements. Both the protestors and the mainstream media were amazed by these symbols while simultaneously failing to attribute any other meaning than symbolic to their active participation.

Both of these figures, the female idols of the Gezi Resistance, *Woman in Red* and *Woman in Black* were promoted as “brave, beautiful women” and projected as the desired modern subjects of the nation. The contribution of these female figures to the increasing numbers of protestors was indeed very important. However, this fascination also points to a patriarchal approach, reproducing the discourse which dwells upon fear, highlighting the fragile and beautiful female body, and even reminding us of the good old republican mythology of women and their courage during the war years.

To illustrate the attention they received, I am going to turn to Google Trends. When you google the keywords, *Gezi* and *Kadın*, the majority of the links would direct you to stories of one of these women. In fact, as the third happenings marked with yellow in the timeline, in google trends analysis, the top story was the woman protesting in her bikini in Taksim square and also her being an “immoral atheist woman.”

Nonetheless, the real beauty of feminist politics in Turkey reveals itself not through the resisting female bodies that fascinated everyone, but with the encounters those feminist collectives had with other groups occupying the park. Their workshops and then painting over the homophobic and sexist swear words with purple sprays are the strongest and most popular example of it.

The title of the conference today provides a framework stating a question about what happened **since** Gezi, but as Cihan already explained, feminists were active political actors **prior** to Gezi, and they prove themselves to be experienced campaign developers **during** the Gezi resistance. They were very successful in reconstructing the discourse of the resistance. Therefore, I want to salute the women who did a wonderful job sustaining a counter-language to the patriarchal discourse of both other protestors and the Govt.

If we get back to what happened on the ground, after Gezi remained occupied for a while, Mutlu, the governor of Istanbul calling himself “Uncle Governor” and assuming giving parental advice made a call to mothers to protect their children, to whom he also associated himself having paternal feelings. He was basically speaking to the mothers of the protestors, both declaring the youth protesting as delinquent children and again evoking motherhood as the sole responsibility of women. In his speeches, again the same discursive tones were quite there. He sees women primarily as part of family, addressing them in regard to their motherly protective feelings, which should overrule every other social role, if there is any, for women.

As a response to the governor, mothers went out to the streets, and before the day that police evicted the park on June 14th, they formed a human-chain around the park. They were resisting the police violence hand in hand with their delinquent children.

As you can see in the timeline, Erdogan at the same time was also talking about women’s issues in Turkey from another angle, mentioning the attack to a veiled woman which took place in Kabatas and combining it with how immoral the protests are.

In his exact words:

*“They beat my girls wearing headscarves.. they entered our mosques with their beer and their shoes. “*

Erdogan’s discourse aimed to divide women into categories of secular vs religious; which is indeed not something new. But women were rioting together, and this time it was another context. Consequent to his negating discourse, feminists and anti-capitalist Muslims responded with various demonstrations in Gezi Park, disregarding his efforts of segregating the feminist resistance.

Additionally, note that the emphasis on the dichotomy between secular and religious imagery of women is closely related with the hegemonic discourse positing motherhood as women's primary social role. Women marched on the streets, chanting “Take your hands off my body, my identity, my veil!”

Then, on June 15, police brutally attacked Gezi Park after 16 days of occupation and evicted the park. On June 16<sup>th</sup>, police formed a barricade around the park. Protesters tried to reclaim the ground and Taksim Square. However, police brutality intensified, and they arrested a significant number of protesters, including many women.

Gezi occupation was over, but the Gezi resistance was being transferred to parks in each neighborhood. Macka and Yogurtcu was becoming hubs for feminist groups to assemble and to get organized. Later on, feminist resistance was continuing with forums, workshops held every week on various issues of women’s struggle in the Yogurtcu.

On June, 30<sup>th</sup>, a woman revealed her story of being sexually harassed under custody in a police vehicle called “scorpion”. Overcoming fear and the public shame with the strength they gained through the experience of solidarity, more women started exposing the abuse by the police publicly. After almost a week, TTB (Turkish Medical Association) posted a declaration to their website about female doctors being sexually assaulted by the police while they were trying to treat the wounded protesters as volunteers.

Right after that on July 22nd, Women demonstrated in massive numbers, chanting:

“A life without Tayyip, a life without Harassment”

The police by violating the bodily integrity of women, and the govt. statements through inflicting “public shame,” female protesters were aimed to be repressed both physically and discursively.

On the day of wide-ranged protests against sexual harassment and violence, on July 22nd, the Ministry of Health hinted at the upcoming regulations of C-Section and natural birth, saying, “Brave mothers give birth to brave children”. The middle-class women, who were mostly the ones marching on the streets were targeted with this statement. As a discursive move, it was referring to the imagery of “brave women,” contrasting it with the hegemonic discourse on motherhood.

Only 3 days later, on July 25 on TRT, the state TV channel in Turkey, a Mullah sympathizing with AKP stated: “Pregnant women should not wander on the streets with such bellies... It’s disgraceful. It is not realism, it is immorality”. Feminist resistance responded both marching on the streets and started a digital resistance via the hashtag #direnhamile #resistpregnant on the following day.

Of course, the most piercing maneuver was against the direct invasion of the bodily integrity of women by applications such as strip search. On Aug 8, a woman named Elif Kaya spoke courageously about her experience of abuse under custody, and soon after, a video showing almost a dozen police women forcing her to undress and searching her was released. That was also the case with Yapici and some other female members of Taksim Solidarity, when they were taken under custody. Unfortunately, the ones we know of are only the tip of the iceberg.

To conclude, It is an obvious yet to-the-point argument that the AKP government systematically reproduces the subject-position of women as they are reduced to child bearers and to secondary or cheap labor force, through repeating statements about the female body and motherhood, through sexual harassment and through constant reinforcement of the good old “divide” between the traditional and modern images of women. This is why Erdogan campaigns for women to donate at least 3 children to the nation, and that’s why police freely strip search female protestors, and that’s why that ministries come together and develop a bill, that heavily criticized by feminists makes sure women can be reproduced as mothers and wives and also remain as the minor contributor to the economy within the neoliberal and patriarchal projection of the future of the AKP government.

**Thank You!**